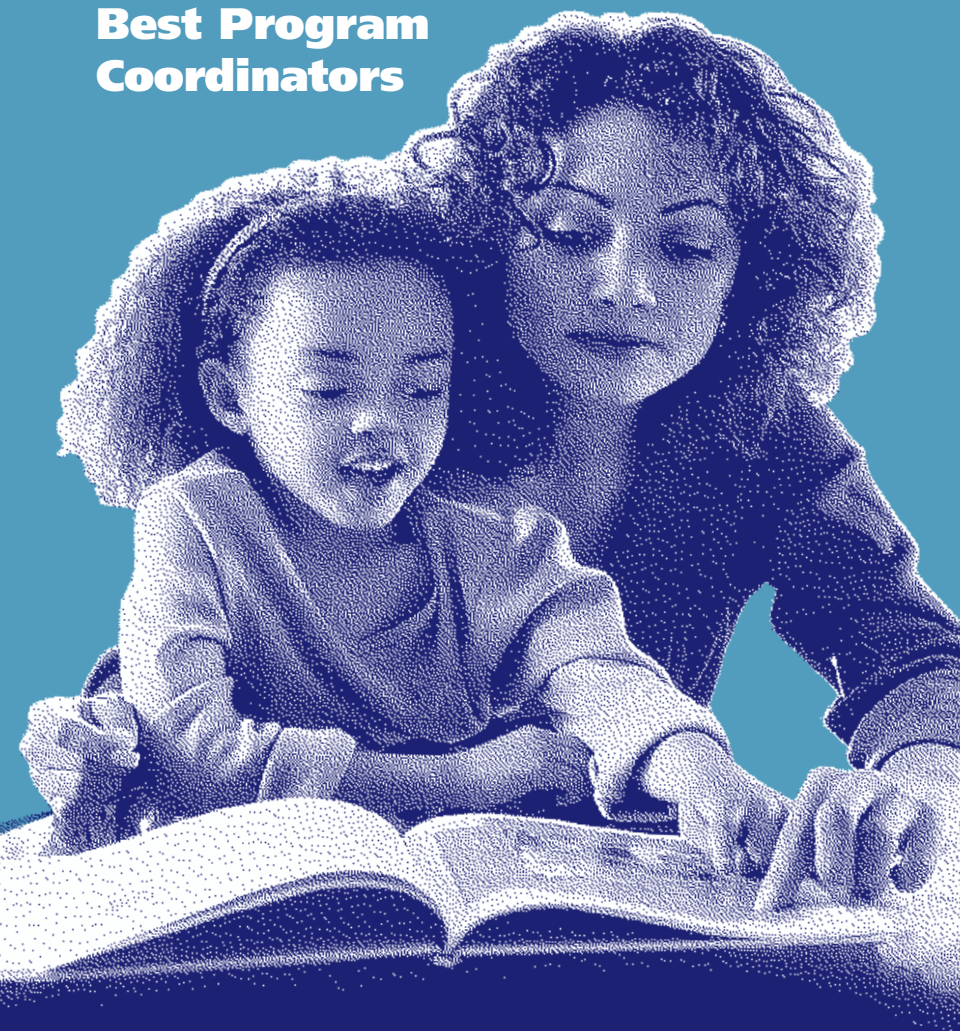


READING IS FUNDAMENTAL'S

# Best Practices Guide



**Advice from RIF's  
Best Program  
Coordinators**



*Sponsored by* **MetLife Foundation**

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# Introduction

**I**n June 2006, Reading Is Fundamental program coordinators and volunteer leaders from 25 outstanding RIF programs met in Washington, D.C., for the inaugural Program Excellence Honors Conference. The purpose of the conference was to recognize leading RIF programs for their superb performance, and to have them participate in a forum where they could share their unique insights about producing a successful RIF program. This booklet is the result of our findings. You'll read suggestions from your RIF colleagues who were invited to attend the conference, as well as descriptions of other programs that were nominated but may not have been represented at the gathering.

Use the techniques as they are recorded here or modify them. Most important, allow them to spur new ideas for enhancing your particular program.

Through this booklet, we hope to encourage and remind you that your efforts to provide books for children who would otherwise not own any, and your dedication to motivate children and parents to read, have far-reaching impact. As a RIF volunteer, every book distribution and motivational reading activity you conduct helps to meet pressing needs and creates the potential for an improved quality of life for countless young children and their families.

We at RIF are grateful for your commitment to helping children discover the joy of reading, and we honor all our volunteers for the difference you're making in children's lives.

We also thank the MetLife Foundation for their generous support of the Program Excellence Honors, which has made the publication of this material possible.

# Building Parent and Community Involvement

**P**arents and community members help bring RIF's literacy mission to life. Through their support and participation, parents and members of the community infuse programs with leadership, enthusiasm, and creativity. Although getting them involved as volunteers is often challenging, the coordinators we spoke to at the Program Excellence Honors Conference said people were more likely to participate when they were invited personally to a RIF event. That personal touch—a phone call, a letter home, or a short conversation—went a long way in drawing parents and the public to a literacy event. “I am always amazed at how willing people are to help out when asked,” said a RIF coordinator.



After parents experienced the program for themselves and saw the children's excitement first hand, they more fully appreciated the life-changing value and flat-out fun offered in a RIF program. As one coordinator said, "Enthusiasm is contagious." The merits of RIF also became clear to local citizens when they observed the program. The generous, fun-loving service they saw inspired them to greater commitments: "Once you get parent and community members involved, they will come back," said another coordinator.

The following are some practices RIF coordinators and volunteer leaders have used in conjunction with one-on-one invitations to create parent and community involvement. They offer practical tips, wise observations, and encouraging thoughts.

## COORDINATORS' TIPS & PRACTICES

### Recruit Parents to Reach Other Parents

- ▶ Identify that core group of parent supporters and meet with them. At that meeting, go through the class list to see if they can identify parents they know personally. Have them make a personal contact and ask for help. Most people don't refuse people they know.
- ▶ I have seen the RIF program empower parents. After you have one parent hooked, use them to help you catch another. Before you know it, your parent involvement will grow.
- ▶ What we have found that works is establishing a relationship with a few parents and recruiting them to reach others.

### Enlist Your Kids to Reach Parents and the Public

- ▶ Take along pictures of past RIF events and letters from the students asking for their support. Making parents and businesses aware of the importance of RIF, especially through the children's eyes, is usually a successful way to entice others to participate. How can you say "no" to the enthusiasm and gratitude of a young person?

- ▶ Have the kids be a part of inviting parents and community people. Most can't resist a child's invitation.
- ▶ Once you get the kids excited about RIF, let them share with the community and parents. Let the students come in front of groups and share an experience with RIF. Have students write letters to the community, and invite and encourage their parents' involvement.
- ▶ Parental involvement is all about stressing the ways the RIF program ensures their specific child a better future. Have meetings and make phone calls. Write letters to parents about how enthusiastic their child is about the books you give out and what a good sign this is for their future. Every parent wants to hear that his or her child is smart and successful.
- ▶ I have gone into the school and gotten the children excited about doing a reading challenge. I then give them the information to take to the parents to get them involved in helping their child meet the challenge.

## **Personal Invitations to Parents Work Best**

- ▶ Many parents come along with their children during the "meet and greets" at the beginning of the year. If there is time, share information about the RIF program.
- ▶ If you have a PTA or PTO, go to the meetings. Explain RIF and ask for volunteers.
- ▶ Why not phone or speak in person to a parent who might be hesitant to become involved? Ask them to work on a small project within your RIF program. After the project is completed, be sure to provide positive feedback—maybe highlight this person in your newsletter.

## **Be Sensitive to Parents' Needs and Culture**

- ▶ Seek out and involve a parent or community member who can give you ideas about what would work with your parents. There might be a cultural aspect or barrier preventing your community or the parents from participating. It may be something you have not thought of, but that someone who is part of the community is aware of.

- ▶ Realize many parents are busy. They may work two jobs, have money problems, several kids, and may be single. Don't put energies where they can't flourish. Give parents simple opportunities for participation.
- ▶ What religious institutions are your parents members of? Doing outreach or having events at churches, temples, and synagogues might be a way to reach more parents.
- ▶ Consider what cultures impact most specifically on the children and parents in your community. Figure out what languages are most commonly spoken and provide information accordingly.

## **Recruit Volunteers from Your Community**

- ▶ I have found that our area businesses will never turn us down when we go to them and ask for just about anything.
- ▶ In terms of community involvement, it's important to show how little it takes to make a huge difference—and then to be appreciative of everything and anything a community resource offers.
- ▶ We contact lots of community people—our local college, hospital, police, firemen, senior citizens, and high school students—who help with the distributions. They have so much fun that they call us to ask when they can help again! We put up bulletin boards and signs in the hallways so the children know RIF day is coming! It's a Big Deal! And we put a message on the marquee in front of the school to let parents and the community know that a RIF event is coming up.
- ▶ Start small. Get one community contact established, and expand year to year.
- ▶ Think about nontraditional ways you can get volunteers. They don't have to be parents. Seniors with release time at our high school volunteer. They get high school credit for their efforts.
- ▶ We involve people by making them feel appreciated and recognizing their service as leaders to students and the community. We invite local firemen who bring a fire truck, police, community college faculty, library staff, retired school teachers, and grandparents.

## Branch Out Further: Contact Local Agencies

- ▶ Because of the high number of parents who themselves struggle with literacy, many may have negative attitudes about books, reading, and education. It is important to find nonthreatening ways to involve parents. One way to do this is by tapping into other community agencies that deal with these parents on a regular basis (Family and Children Services, migrant groups, GED classes). These organizations can include RIF as an ancillary focus, and in this way encourage parental involvement.
- ▶ I go to socials for our Head Start program asking them to help choose the books for distribution and to help with the motivational activities.
- ▶ Utilize organized groups to kick off your volunteer needs and to provide examples of successful book giveaways for parents to observe. For example, use senior citizens as a group of volunteers, or organized high school students such as the National Honor Society. Service clubs such as Kiwanis, Lions, and Rotary provide tremendous human resources.
- ▶ We use our senior citizens from the local senior center to help with the distribution. They organize and count books. We have also used them as readers in our activities.

## Final Tips to Help You on Your Way

- ▶ Get the word out to parents all year long.
- ▶ Ask parents what the barriers to participation are. Then work on those.
- ▶ Be persistent! If community members don't show up right away, give them another chance.
- ▶ Success breeds success, and each person who sees what you are doing or participates will bring new recruits.
- ▶ Start out small and take simple, slow steps.
- ▶ Take a deep breath. You can do it!

# Motivational Activities

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otivational reading activities are an integral part of the RIF program. They help children discover how enjoyable reading can be, and give young readers positive associations with the development of literacy skills. Not only are they helpful to children, they also benefit adults. Motivational activities in the home foster parent-child relationships and remind parents that they are their children's first and most influential teachers. As for RIF leaders and volunteers, they see children becoming interested in words and stories and books, and they receive the satisfaction that their efforts are creating lifelong readers.



Motivating children to read takes time, commitment, and organization, but no one ever said it couldn't be fun. The following are some of the fun activities coordinators and volunteer leaders who attended the Program Excellence Honors Conference have used to improve the effectiveness and success of their programs.

## COORDINATORS'

## TIPS & PRACTICES

### **Be Creative: Use a Variety of Motivational Activities and Themes for Distributions**

- ▶ Instead of trying to decide how to handle Halloween party issues, we have a book character parade. The children and staff dress up as their favorite book character. The parents love this event. The children bring either the book their character is from or a slip of paper with the book name written on it. Everyone who is dressed up marches around the school in a character parade.
- ▶ Hold a RIF carnival and get students, parents, and community members involved. Students and parents can man different stations and community members can donate goods, as well as help.
- ▶ If applicable, highlight different cultures when holding events so that all members of the school feel valued.
- ▶ We always have a "character" at our events because the children love them and want their pictures taken. We provide a few photos, but often this event gets parents there with their cameras.
- ▶ A coordinator enlists the help of influential community leaders as guest readers for RIF events. Her readers include six state assembly members, the governor, the local mayor, a superior court judge, the superintendent of schools, and the chiefs of the police and fire departments. The director of the local zoo also assists in readings, accompanied by a "resident of the zoo."

- ▶ A RIF coordinator holds an annual reading rally called RIF Rocks. At the rally, all the RIF sites and the schools in the district without a RIF program come together to start the school year with a reading focus. The coordinator recruits authors, storytellers, community groups, and members of local businesses to attend the event. RIF Rocks includes a literacy parade, video testimonials from RIF alumnae, a celebrity charity basketball game, and free T-shirts and door prizes donated by local businesses.
- ▶ We invite family members to have a picnic lunch at school with their children, and during that time the children share the RIF book they received at the distribution.

## Planning At-Home Activities for Parents and Kids Increases Participation

- ▶ During special events (the Olympics, Super Bowl, etc.), we send home forms for parents to find trivia information with their child on newspapers or on television. The child returns his answers to the trivia questions each day (one question per day) and five correct answers are drawn from a bag for a prize related to the special event.
- ▶ We find that parents are more likely to support at-home activities if they have been to a book distribution, particularly if they are offered some education or tips to strengthen their skills and confidence regarding reading at home.
- ▶ We ask parents to sign their child's reading log each evening, which indicates that they read with their child.
- ▶ A coordinator involves parents who can't attend book distributions at school by giving them an at-home task, such as cutting out paper figures to decorate the book distribution room.

***A coordinator involves parents who can't attend book distributions at school by giving them an at-home task, such as cutting out paper figures to decorate the book distribution room.***

- ▶ Getting the kids excited about reading is important. Have them keep a journal of reading their new RIF book to their parents.
- ▶ You may want to have the children and parents work together on a project to write and illustrate their own homemade books and then bring them in to share at an “Author’s Tea.”

## **Make Everyone Feel Like a Winner by Providing Incentives and Rewards**

- ▶ Offer prizes to children who read their RIF book with their parent or other adult in their household. Children can motivate their parents, and parents are generally eager to help their children earn rewards. We send home a bookmark with the children’s RIF book. When they bring it in with an adult’s signature, they get a prize (i.e., pencil, eraser, etc.).
- ▶ Offer incentives: Food usually helps! Give door prizes that adults appreciate, put their photo in the newspaper, or highlight them in a newsletter.
- ▶ With the help of a media specialist, a coordinator rewards family involvement by providing an 8x10 Favorite Book Photo that shows parents and their children reading together. What parent can resist a picture of his or her child? It’s a great reward for doing something great.
- ▶ Incentives really do seem to work for our program. Offering small rewards for an assigned amount of reading helps turn parents and children on to the idea of reading and how much fun it can be. Rewards or recognition also work to remind children and parents that their hard work did not go unnoticed.
- ▶ You can also look into providing incentives for parents and community members who participate, such as bookmarks, raffle drawings, library cards, food, etc.

***With the help of a media specialist, a coordinator rewards family involvement by providing an 8x10 Favorite Book Photo that shows parents and their children reading together.***

# Book Distributions

**G**etting children excited about reading and providing them with free, quality books has been at the heart of RIF's mission for more than 40 years. To accomplish these goals, the coordinators and volunteer leaders we interviewed stressed the importance of combining book distributions with other school or community events. Combining events increases opportunities to network with parents and community members. "We began combining different programs . . . with RIF's distributions to try to help with the volunteering," said one coordinator. Combined events also help to create a nonthreatening environment for people who may feel they lack sufficient literacy skills, such as non-English-speaking parents.



Conference attendees also emphasized the significance of appropriate scheduling for book distributions. “We find that different communities have different ideal times for involvement,” said another coordinator. Accommodating parents who work, those who are at home, or members of a migrant community all require different schedules. Varying when and where distributions are held can also rejuvenate a long-established program.

The following tips are from Program Excellence Honors Conference attendees who are putting thousands of books into children’s hands. They explain their approach to book distributions and how they make them so productive. Also included are descriptions of other effective practices used in RIF programs across the country.

## COORDINATORS’

## TIPS & PRACTICES

### **For Maximum Effectiveness: Combine Book Distributions with School and Community Events**

- ▶ You may find success combining a distribution with another established event in your school to create excitement and take advantage of the audience.
- ▶ If there is already a community-wide event happening, schedule a meeting with the head of the community group and figure out how you can “piggy-back” on the event.
- ▶ Hold RIF distributions along with other activities. We had a read-a-thon for a local teacher/football player who was paralyzed in a car accident.
- ▶ In a school where one-third of the students are English language learners representing 15 different languages, the coordinator involves parents in book distributions by pairing all RIF events with other school programs. She schedules as many evening events as possible at staggered times throughout the year. The coordinator has found that once non-English-speaking parents attend events, their children gladly interpret for them.

- ▶ At our evening book distributions, we involve parents in their own workshop where they learn effective strategies to read with their child or help with their homework.
- ▶ To utilize a variety of community leaders, one coordinator arranges theme-related socials connected to different occupations. For example, she created a Bike Rodeo book distribution and connected it to bike safety. The county sheriff talked to the children about bike safety and fitted them with bike helmets. Parents and other volunteers adjusted the children's bike seats. The sheriff also read aloud to the children at the distribution.
- ▶ Some schools have "Library Night" and "Homework Night" where parents can come to learn more about the library and their children's homework responsibilities. This is particularly good for ESL students whose parents were born in another country. Some schools have tied a RIF distribution in with this also.
- ▶ The entire Redding Rancheria community of the Pit River, Wintu, and Yana Indians promotes reading. At their annual "Big Time" event, similar in nature to a powwow, the tribal council, elders, and tribal administrative staff read to the children. The books are distributed in conjunction with the other cultural stations, such as food and crafts. As a result of the top-down emphasis on reading, there is a high percentage of parents who participate in the program in some capacity due to the leadership demonstrated by the tribal elders.
- ▶ On the first day of class in an urban school, children who are escorted to school by their parents receive a bag of new and barely used books donated by churches and other organizations in the area. This distribution introduces the RIF program to the parents and creates an immediate bond between the parents, the school, and RIF. Through this and other supplemental distributions, called "Bag o' Books," volunteers have gathered, sorted, packed, and distributed more than 10,000 books each year, which is in addition to the 24,000 RIF books they distribute annually.

***You may find success combining a distribution with another established event in your school to create excitement and take advantage of the audience.***

## Be Flexible: Accommodate a Variety of Schedules and Use Different Locations for Distributions

- ▶ Timing and location are important. Are work schedules preventing parents and members of the community from attending? Try a before-school event, an after-school, evening, or Saturday morning event. Find a time that is best. Also, change location if one is not successful.
- ▶ Try varying the times of your events. Don't continue to change it, though, as consistency helps parents plan to attend.
- ▶ We've tried to schedule our evening events at the same time each year. Parents have come to expect a RIF and pizza night in December, which coincides with our Secret Santa Shop night. It's now a tradition.
- ▶ Since many of our parents work, we have scheduled activities on the weekends. This has helped with participation.
- ▶ Make sure your motivational activities and book distributions are "parent friendly," meaning before or after work, or during lunch breaks.
- ▶ Two leaders conduct RIF on Wheels for a migrant program that serves 2,300 children in their state. During the summer agricultural season, the leaders drive from farm to ranch to one-room schoolhouse to conduct book distributions, deliver materials, and train volunteers at nine RIF sites.

***Make sure your motivational activities and book distributions are "parent friendly," meaning before or after work, or during lunch breaks.***

# Team Leadership

**R**unning a RIF program often requires more oversight and logistical planning than an authorizing official and program coordinator can accomplish on their own. Implementing a team leadership approach with assistance from parents, school staff, and members of the community provides a stronger foundation and helps ensure greater success.



Coordinators and volunteer leaders who attended the Program Excellence Honors Conference endorsed delegating various ongoing responsibilities to leadership groups, such as a book selection committee, a public relations team, and a fundraising committee. This approach allows volunteers to focus more exclusively on the aspects of the program they're most interested in and feel best suited to work on. Conference attendees also found the involvement of parents was a vital component in their program's continuing effectiveness. Because of their knowledge of children's interests and their personal desire to encourage young readers, parents offered valuable insight and creativity in the decision-making process for literacy events.

The following statements are the views of conference attendees who are affecting the lives of children through RIF by drawing on the talents of people in their communities. As one attendee advised, "Don't try to do this all by yourself. Seek help, assign others work, and brainstorm. Remember that more heads together are better than one."

## COORDINATORS'

## TIPS & PRACTICES

### Create Volunteer Committees: Let Them Support and Promote Your Program

- ▶ Invite a few individuals, teachers, community members, and parents (especially parents) to serve on a planning committee. This is an integral part of the process, because this group will help you identify additional resources and generate ideas of how to better reach the parents and community.
- ▶ You may want to establish a public relations team. Ask your most enthusiastic participants—children, teachers, and parents—to work with you on presentations and outreach.



- ▶ The last team we implemented, and which works quite well, is the Donation Committee. We express our wishes to the committee and they go out and try to find donations from wherever is necessary.
- ▶ What has worked for me is talking about ideas and then brainstorming them with other staff, community people, and parents. Working together on projects really makes them come to life.
- ▶ My advice to you: Do not try to do this alone. Talk to your coworkers and use their strengths to help. TEAM = Together Everyone Achieves More. Ask for teachers to volunteer to serve on a brainstorming committee. Contact successful programs and ask how they get involvement.



## Recruit Parents for Your Planning Committees: Their Input Is Essential

- ▶ One of the most beneficial things is to let parents be a part of the brainstorming. We set up a meeting at the beginning of the year for parents to share ideas about the kinds of books and activities their children like.
- ▶ Parents know their children and have great ideas. Use parent ideas as a springboard for a book distribution.
- ▶ Our RIF program is run solely by parent volunteers. They schedule the distributions, order the books, help run the distributions, and schedule the motivational activities.

***Parents know their children and have great ideas. Use parent ideas as a springboard for a book distribution.***

# Fundraising

**T**he coordinators and volunteer leaders we interviewed at the Program Excellence Honors Conference use a variety of methods to raise funds for their RIF programs. Many have had success by first reaching out to those closest to them: the parents of the children served by RIF. The coordinators and leaders make presentations at PTO and PTA meetings where they inform parents about RIF and offer them the opportunity to volunteer and provide financial support. Then they branch out to the community. Many coordinators recommended partnering with community organizations, which they found opened up additional avenues for making contacts and raising funds.



The coordinators also stressed the importance of making personal contact with parents and community members. Heartfelt connections made in the recruiting process greatly increased the possibility of people offering their support. "Try reaching out to parents through personal notes and phone calls. Always stress how valued they are and how much their presence would be appreciated," said one coordinator. Coordinators also emphasized the need to express thanks for donors' efforts and financial gifts. "Everyone wants to feel they made a difference. Openly appreciating donors keeps them involved and often leads them to giving more and encouraging friends to do the same," said another leader.

The following tips are from RIF coordinators who have encountered the challenges and rewards of raising funds. They speak from experience about their involvement with parents and members of the community, how they create publicity materials, and the specific ways they communicate their program's need for financial support.

## COORDINATORS' TIPS & PRACTICES

### Support Begins at Home: Raise Funds Through Parents and Community Members

- ▶ Ask the PTA to help fund the RIF program and to challenge the parents. Perhaps for every parent who participates in some way, the PTA could pledge a certain amount of money.
- ▶ Invite local businesses and community agencies into your school or site for a meet-and-greet social. Sometimes the best way for people to get involved is by showing them the kids in action. Just take the time to make the people feel important to your school and don't even ask for help at the time. It is through information that people gather a background, but it is through the heart that people change. Tug at their hearts and soon the pocket books will open, and hopefully volunteering opportunities will also follow.

- ▶ Our community elementary students help raise funds through Bingo Fun Night, Skate Fun Night, catalogue fundraising, etc.
- ▶ Try a book drive that combines the options of donating new books or cash to the RIF program. That has worked well for us.
- ▶ A community church collected money for us through their “Make a Joyful Noise” collection. That involved asking church members to put the spare change they were carrying into containers designated for RIF. Some businesses offered to collect money for RIF. We also sent a letter around to any parent who was interested in asking their employer if he or she would like to make an in-kind donation to the RIF program.
- ▶ I would suggest using the chamber of commerce to gather names and addresses of local community groups like Kiwanis, the Rotary Club, and Junior Aid, etc. Put together a letter that includes a photo of a distribution, some RIF public relations information, and a heartfelt request to meet to discuss funding. Follow up with a phone call to the president. You can also ask for readers if that’s all they want to start with. Keep your foot in the door!

## Motivate Your Donors by Telling Them What Their Money Will Accomplish

- ▶ We’ve found it helpful to reach out wide—not just to those we perceive have money. We let people know that for \$1.50 (with \$4.50 federal match) we can buy three books! And we happily will accept a donation of that size. Make it easy for people to give you money. When you speak, bring donation envelopes with you. Do you have a website? Get donation options up on it!
- ▶ The best “sell” we have for our RIF fundraising is the concept of matching funds. Be sure to provide a clear message about what a donor’s money will provide.
- ▶ Take pictures of the children receiving their RIF books. Get quotes from the kids and put them together in brochures for release to request money or help. Make it simple.

***Make it easy for people to give you money.***

***When you speak, bring donation envelopes with you.***

- ▶ Get testimonials from children and parents about the need for books. Take them to local businesses or civic groups to encourage donations of funds.
- ▶ One thing you may want to try is making parents and community members more aware of the wonderful RIF events you're holding by publicizing the events. Send articles to local newspapers with eye-catching photos of the children receiving and reading their books.

## **Get the Word Out: Publicize Your Program to Gain Support**

- ▶ Do you have someone with an interesting story about RIF that you can pitch to the media? Perhaps an adult who received RIF books as a child and can describe its impact on him? An articulate child?
- ▶ Offer to give free advertising to businesses if they give you money. Use bookplates, media releases, and announcements at distributions to thank them.
- ▶ Credit donors through media releases and book plates.

## **Thank Your Donors. It's Important!**

- ▶ It's key to be incredibly appreciative. Whether someone donates an hour of their time, space in their newspaper, or \$10,000, they should be invited to visit, sent updates, and publicly acknowledged at some point.
- ▶ Be sure to acknowledge businesses that are supportive with a special thanks. It may encourage others to seek the free publicity.
- ▶ Ask your parents and children who received books to write letters thanking the congressional representative that delegated funds for RIF.
- ▶ Contact local banks and other businesses for assistance with funding. In return for donations, submit an article to the paper recognizing the community donors. Have children draw pictures and do thank-you cards to the businesses.

# Conclusion

**Y**ou have now read some of the best practices of your fellow RIF coordinators and volunteers. We encourage you to implement these practices where you can and to create new ones. As this booklet shows, there are many ways to run a successful RIF program. The possibilities are as numerous as the adventures found in books.

For additional resources, visit [www.rif.org](http://www.rif.org).





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**Reading Is Fundamental, Inc.**  
1825 Connecticut Ave., NW, Suite 400  
Washington, DC 20009  
[www.rif.org](http://www.rif.org)

